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Committee on Conferences
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Draft report

Rapporteur: Mr. Yury G. **Yaroshevich** (Belarus)

III. Meetings management/improved utilization of conference-servicing resources and facilities

B. Meeting statistics of United Nations organs and consultations with/letters to bodies concerning utilization of the conference services available to them

Introduction and overview

1. At its 491st meeting, on 8 September, the Committee considered the section of the report of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences containing statistical data and analysis of the planned and actual utilization of conference resources allocated to a core sample of bodies that met in New York, Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi in 2007 (A/63/119, paras. 27-41 and annex I). The overall utilization factor at the four duty stations had remained at 83 per cent, the same level as that reported the previous year and above the established benchmark of 80 per cent.

2. The Committee also heard an oral report by the Chairperson on his consultations with five intergovernmental bodies that had utilized less than the applicable benchmark percentage of their allocated resources during the period from 2005 to 2007. As in previous years, the consultations had been designed to assist the bodies concerned to make efficient use of their conference-servicing resources while ensuring that their substantive work was completed successfully.

3. A number of suggestions for improvement had been made during the consultations, including providing advance notice of cancellations; beginning meetings on time, even without a quorum; scheduling shorter meetings if it was anticipated that less time would be required; using any time remaining at the end of the meeting to discuss additional agenda items; releasing unused interpretation services to meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States; and reducing the number of meetings initially requested to accurately reflect the actual

expected demand for conference services without changing the actual entitlements to such services.

4. Late starts and early endings had a particularly negative impact on the utilization factors of a number of intergovernmental bodies, but their impact could be minimized by reinforcing the need for discipline. During the consultations, it had been pointed out that adding "back-up" items to the agendas of certain meetings might undermine the established working methods of the bodies concerned because their programmes of work were based on the availability of high-level speakers and representatives from outside New York whose travel arrangements were fixed. Nevertheless, the bureaux and secretariats concerned had responded positively to the Chairperson's proposal that meeting planners be advised at least one day in advance when it was expected that meetings would end early, thereby making it possible to reassign interpretation services to other meetings. That strategy would be pursued during the sixty-third session of the General Assembly. Efforts would also be made to cooperate closely with meeting planners, as well as to give advance notice of cancellations.

5. At the same meeting, the Committee also considered the section of the report of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences concerning the provision of interpretation services to meetings of "as required" bodies (A/63/119, paras. 42-47 and annex II).

Discussion

6. Support was expressed for the ongoing efforts to optimize the use of conference services and, in particular, for the adoption of new and innovative mechanisms to increase the capacity of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management to deal with unanticipated meeting requests. Additional information was requested on the specific measures taken by the Secretariat to deal with persistent underutilizers, and one delegation wished to know what portion of the unit costs for one meeting with services was discretionary.

7. A representative of the Secretariat explained that the unit costs set out in annex VI to the report related only to conference-servicing functions; the costs of using the meeting room were not included. The Department dealt with all underutilizers in the same proactive fashion, making specific recommendations for improvement. Rather than focusing on the difficult issue of late starts and early endings, it tried to stress the importance of careful planning and the need to reallocate unused resources to other bodies.

8. Some delegations expressed serious concern about the use of the United Nations premises by a few States for activities that neither maintained the respect for the dignity of the Organization nor were in line with the purposes and principles of the United Nations. Delegations stressed that the issue required particular attention since it had created the perception of possible misuse of the premises.

9. Referring to meetings of "as required" bodies, several delegations enquired about the specific entitlements of those bodies and about the relationship between the servicing of those meetings and the servicing of meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States. It appeared contradictory to suggest that as a result of an increase in the number of meeting requests and the consequent strengthening of the strategic reserve for meetings of "as required" bodies, the

ability of the Department to provide interpretation services to regional and other major groupings had been enhanced.

10. A representative of the Secretariat explained that, in general, the meeting entitlements of "as required" bodies, which included open-ended working groups of the General Assembly and the Security Council, were determined when the bodies themselves were established and were set out in either a statement of conference-servicing implications or a statement of programme budget implications. The Department had an obligation to service all such meetings. Although the increased strategic reserve put in place at Headquarters had resulted in an improvement in the provision of services to "as required" bodies, it was still sometimes inadequate, particularly at peak periods, when several such bodies tended to meet in parallel. However, when such bodies cancelled meetings or reduced the number of meetings requested, any unused capacity was redeployed to other meetings. A delegation enquired what was meant by "peak period" and whether it referred to the regular session of the General Assembly. A representative of the Secretariat explained that the peak period was from March to May, when the programme of meetings was particularly heavy. The Department would continue to monitor the situation with a view to determining whether it would be necessary to increase the strategic reserve further during the next biennium.

11. In response to a question about the prioritization of meeting requests, a representative of the Secretariat explained that requests were prioritized according to the status of the requesting body and the nature of the meeting requested. Plenary meetings took precedence over informal consultations, for instance, but when a number of bodies with equal priority requested meetings at the same time, a first-come, first-served approach tended to be adopted.

C. Provision of interpretation services to meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States

Introduction and overview

12. At its 491st meeting, on 8 September, the Committee considered the section of the report of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences concerning the provision of interpretation services to meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States (A/63/119, paras. 48-53 and annex III).

Discussion

13. While one delegation expressed concern about the apparently causal relationship between the increased strategic reserve and the increase in the percentage of meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States that were provided with interpretation services, another pointed out that the availability of additional capacity to service the meetings of such groups was merely an unintended, albeit welcome, by-product of a strengthened strategic reserve.

14. A representative of the Secretariat explained that the Department had increased the strategic reserve in the knowledge that any unused capacity would be reallocated to meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States. However, no resources, either human or financial, were specifically earmarked for such meetings, since they were serviced entirely from unused resources reallocated from meetings

of "as required" bodies. The recent increase in the percentage of meetings held by such groups that had been provided with interpretation services was attributable to a combination of effective planning and the holding of ongoing consultations with the groups.

D. Improved utilization of conference facilities at the United Nations Office at Nairobi

Introduction and overview

15. At its 491st meeting, on 8 September, the Committee considered the section of the report of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences concerning the improved utilization of conference facilities at the United Nations Office at Nairobi (A/63/119, paras. 54-55).

Discussion

16. Delegations expressed their satisfaction at the significant progress made by the United Nations Office at Nairobi and expressed the hope that the positive trend would continue. It was suggested that a more aggressive marketing strategy should be adopted in order to encourage additional clients to use the Nairobi conference facilities.

17. Responding to a question about the differences in the cost of holding one meeting with interpretation in six languages and support services in New York versus Nairobi, a representative of the Secretariat explained that the costing components for meetings and documentation services included elements relating to the standard salary cost for both permanent and freelance staff, as well as elements relating to the travel and terminal expenses and daily subsistence allowance of non-local temporary assistance.

E. Improved utilization of the conference centre at the Economic Commission for Africa

Introduction and overview

18. At its 491st meeting, on 8 September, the Committee considered the section of the report of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences concerning the conference centre at the Economic Commission for Africa (A/63/119, paras. 56-58).

Discussion

19. Delegations expressed satisfaction at the significant improvement in the rate of utilization of the conference centre at the Economic Commission for Africa and expressed hope that the positive trend would continue.

20. In response to a request for clarification, a representative of the Secretariat explained that the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management was not involved in the management of the conference centre because section 2 of the regular budget covered only the four main duty stations.